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SUBJECT: A RANGE OF EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE PUBLIC CHAMBER

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Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine.
Reasons: 1.4 (B/D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: As the Public Chamber gets down to work following its inaugural plenary on January 22, its members have differing expectations about what it will accomplish. Publicly, many members expressed at least guarded optimism about the Chamber. Privately, views differ appreciably. One Chamber member told us that though he holds modest expectations, he aims to use the body to encourage religious freedom and still hopes Chamber members will propose amendments to the controversial NGO legislation. Valeriy Fadeyev, a Chamber member who was instrumental in the body's creation, now voices little enthusiasm, and others told us privately that he lost interest when he realized how much the Kremlin would control the body. It appears from members' comments that Presidential Administration Deputy Head Vladislav Surkov will play a pivotal role in the Chamber's activities. The Kremlin will apply its guiding hand over the Chamber's predominantly malleable members, but on some issues the body -- or at least some of its members -- may display an element of independence which we should encourage to the extent possible. END SUMMARY.

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HOPEFULNESS IN PUBLIC STATEMENTS

12. (SBU) In the aftermath of the Public Chamber's inaugural plenary (reftel), many of its members have given interviews about their expectations. Most have been predictably -- if sometimes guardedly -- upbeat, although they have differed somewhat in their identification of the Chamber's primary purposes. In a radio interview, Chamber Secretary Yevgeniy Velikhov said he was hopeful the body would mobilize civil society, fight corruption and encourage better moral values in society. However, he implicitly conceded that he was not entirely sure about the Chamber's functions, beginning his reply to the question of what the body would do by saying: "As far as I understand the law...and what the President said at the first meeting." Chamber member and First Channel television producer Aleksandr Shkolnik acknowledged in an interview that the Chamber still needed to gain the public's acceptance. Suggesting that he was hopeful this would take place, Shkolnik said that the Chamber's main goals were to develop a public dialogue on issues and to encourage citizen activism. Chamber member and journalist Aleksey Chadayev argued in an interview that the body could at minimum provoke the Duma to become more active.

13. (SBU) Meanwhile, plans are under discussion for the work of Chamber committees. In another interview, Velikhov said that two committees dealing with foreign policy might produce resolutions on Iran and the UK spy scandal. Pavel Gusev, chair of the Chamber committee on media, said his committee will work on media freedom, with a particular focus on the regions, including through press monitoring. Gusev said that

his committee, having already received inquiries about regional government harassment of media in two regions, would investigate them and send inquiries to regional officials if necessary. The committee also could send its representatives to a region to check out a complaint -- and, he seemed to imply, thus pressure officials there into changing their ways. Gusev took a swipe at the Duma, complaining that it had totally disregarded his committee, and the Chamber more broadly, as it considered new draft legislation that would limit the number of commercials on television. Gusev also complained that with just one staffer, his committee was limited in what it could accomplish. Other members of Gusev's committee also weighed in, with Yelena Zielinskaya, for instance, saying that the committee might develop plans for the establishment of a public television station.

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INFLUENCING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, NGO LEGISLATION

14. (C) In private conversations, we have heard other views about the Chamber. Bishop Sergey Ryakhovskiy, a Chamber member who heads a network of Protestant organizations in Russia, told us January 24 that the success of the body was very much an open question. The Kremlin had formed the Chamber to strengthen its relations with, and gain better control of, civil society with an eye to the 2007-08 elections, Ryakhovskiy argued. Because most of its members were Kremlin-friendly and the Kremlin oversaw its activities, the Chamber could easily prove a rubber stamp. This would become apparent within half a year, Ryakhovskiy posited, and if it proved true, its more independent-minded members would begin to drift away. Whether the Kremlin itself would remain interested in the Chamber over the longer term was also an open question, Ryakhovskiy said; one small indicator was how

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well the building destined for the Chamber's use would be renovated.

15. (C) Nonetheless, Ryakhovskiy argued, his inclusion on the Chamber offered him the opportunity to try to use it to push his core goals, and he intended to do so. One goal is to promote religious freedom, notably for denominations not favored by the government, like Protestants and Catholics, Ryakhovskiy continued. He had already begun using the Chamber to work closely with two other members, Rabbi Berl Lazar and Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin, and he intended to use his prerogatives as a member to investigate accusations of religious discrimination in the provinces and to inform the public about them. Ryakhovskiy added that he had reached out to the Chamber's members representing the Russian Orthodox Church, but had yet to receive a positive response.

16. (C) Noting that he was on the Chamber's committee on civil society, Ryakhovskiy said he also planned to use it to work on the recently passed NGO legislation. As a Chamber member, he could mobilize NGOs throughout the country to investigate implementation of the legislation, Ryakhovskiy related. Beyond that, he had already received the agreement of his committee's chairperson, Mariya Slobodskaya, to begin working on amending the legislation. Ryakhovskiy acknowledged that such an effort might not get far. The Kremlin might well put a quick stop to it, and even his committee's deputy chairperson, Aleksandr Ignatenko, had reacted very non-committally to the proposal. Still, the Chamber had expressed its desire to weigh in on the legislation while it was being drafted, and Ryakhovskiy hoped he could build on those sentiments even now, after Putin signed the bill.

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DISILLUSIONMENT FROM A FOUNDER?

17. (C) As we have noted previously, Ekspert magazine chief editor Valeriy Fadeyev had been among the key players in the Chamber's formation. In a January 23 meeting, however, he struck us as surprisingly unenthusiastic about it. Asked

about his plans as a Chamber member, Fadeyev replied that he would prefer to work on other projects. Had Chamber member and businessman Vladimir Potanin agreed to head the committee charged with economic issues, Fadeyev might have joined that committee, he commented, since that might have offered the chance to have at least some serious impact. Because Potanin had opted to head the Chamber's committee on charitable work and voluntarism, Fadeyev had opted to join a committee on globalization and regional development, which had an unclear role and was unlikely to require him to do much work. (Indeed, that committee's Chairman, Andranik Migranyan, told us January 23 that he had developed the idea for such a committee and now had to figure out what it would actually do.)

18. (C) Nezavisimaya Gazeta owner Konstantin Remchukov, who is not a Chamber member but works closely with Fadeyev on the "November 4 Club" of rightist political leaders, told us January 25 that Fadeyev had become disillusioned with the Chamber. Fadeyev had been a leading figure in defining an ideology for the United Russia party, but when that effort was squashed at the United Russia congress in December, Fadeyev had become unhappy with the Kremlin, according to Remchukov. Since then, Remchukov recounted, Fadeyev had come to realize the full extent to which the Kremlin would control the Chamber, and his enthusiasm for working in that body had also declined.

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SURKOV'S PROMINENT ROLE

19. (C) Ryakhovskiy highlighted to us the pivotal role Surkov played in the Chamber. A moving force in its creation, Surkov had then been directly involved in establishing its membership and activities. Surkov would continue to play an active role, relying on one of his advisors, PA Domestic Politics Administration deputy head Mikhail Ostrovskiy, to attend meetings and deal with key details, Ryakhovskiy said. Indeed, Ryakhovskiy reported, he would soon be meeting Ostrovskiy and Aleksandr Kudryavtsev, head of the PA's office in charge of religious affairs, to discuss Chamber business.

110. (C) Remchukov agreed that Surkov had a predominant role in the Chamber's activities. He reported that, having been politically outmaneuvered by PA Deputy Head Igor Sechin, Surkov had been instructed by Putin to become less engaged on foreign policy issues. According to Remchukov, Sechin rather than Surkov had also been tasked with weakening former PM Mikhail Kasyanov's political efforts. As a result, Remchukov said, Surkov now had more time to devote to the Chamber.

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COMMENT

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111. (C) The Public Chamber was designed to strengthen the Kremlin's grip over NGOs and to help realize Putin's vision of a civil society that is compliant rather than independent.

The Kremlin populated the Chamber predominantly with pro-Putin figures, and Surkov will no doubt do his best to ensure that they do not stray from the Kremlin line. Already, the Chamber is being portrayed as helping implement Putin's national projects and as fighting the excesses of bureaucracy, which the Kremlin blames for many of the country's problems. That the media committee will focus on media freedom in the provinces suggests that it will be used to bludgeon regional officials rather than to encourage broader media independence.

112. (C) As noted previously (reftel), however, even Putin's creations have sometimes spun out of the control of the Kremlin, and we cannot rule out that the Chamber could do so, at least on some occasions. Chamber members sought to slow the passage of the controversial NGO legislation; while they may have done so primarily to boost the Chamber's reputation

rather than to fight for a more independent civil society, they did complicate matters for the Kremlin. Some analysts have explained that episode as related to intra-Kremlin infighting that spilled over to the Public Chamber because of Surkov's close association with that body, suggesting that the Chamber may potentially serve as a barometer reflecting internal Kremlin tensions.

¶13. (C) We do not expect Ryakhovskiy to have much success in amending the NGO legislation, particularly in the current atmosphere, but he could have greater success in encouraging better treatment of religious minorities. While we do not have high hopes for the Chamber, its members may sometimes display an independence that we should encourage to the extent possible.

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